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## Grand Rapids Legal News

# High school students help 63rd District Court gauge satisfaction

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LEGAL NEWS PHOTOS BY CYNTHIA PRICE

**by Cynthia Price**

Legal News

Last week, students from Northview High School helped the 63rd District Court determine how well it is doing in helping the people who come to use court services.

In two shifts, the young men and women from the high school administered a survey prepared by Chief Judge Sara Smolenski and Court Administrator Kevin McKay and staff.

Northview Public Schools are located very near the lovely and fairly new court building, with the court's address 1950 East Beltline N.E. and Northview High

School East Campus located at 3801 East Beltline N.E. The high-achieving district includes parts of Plainfield Township, Ada Township and Grand Rapids Township. Students came from Mike Anderson's social studies classes.

As both Judge Smolenski and McKay noted when they oriented the students to the task, a majority of the people who come through the court are not necessarily happy to be there. "They're often here for purposes they don't want to be," Smolenski said, "and sometimes in a situation that can be fairly stressful."

However, it is important to the court that people's experience goes as smoothly as possible, and where there are problems, the judge and staff want to know so they can be fixed.

That is why the court agreed to pilot-test the survey so that Trial Court Services, part of the State Court Administrator's Office (SCAO) in Lansing (profiled in the April 4, 2012, edition of the Grand Rapids Legal News), can generalize from the experience for courts around the state.

The SCAO staff wrote the survey questions.

Other courts participating in the pilot project include courts in Oakland County, Pontiac, Farmington Hills, Waterford, Ogemaw County, Emmet-Charlevoix, and nearby Kentwood.

Jennifer Warner, the Director of Michigan Trial Court Services in the SCAO, and Stacy Westra, SCAO Management Analyst, came to the 63rd to help them set the project up.

Warner says that the pilot projects are just finishing up, and the surveys will be distributed to all the courts in the state by Jan. 1, 2014. She comments, "We're really hopeful that we're going to get information from the courts and the courts' partners on how to improve the services the court provides to the public."

The surveys the students collected will be sent to SCAO for compilation, and Warner says that the results will be returned to the individual courts to be addressed and changes implemented. There will also be aggregated statistics,

which will be released in a report due out in May of next year.

The initiative feeds into the state-led goal of putting in place performance measures that track indicators of how courts are doing, both in the eyes of court users, or customers, and in terms of efficiency and good utilization of resources.

In addition to those pictured at right, student participants included Michaela Nyquist, Savannah Manning, Jessica Swanson, Makenzie Wilson, Drew VanOrt, and Mackie May.

Participants in the morning shift said that nearly everyone they asked was pleasant, even those who preferred not to fill the survey out. To keep track of refusals, the surveyors were asked to write “Refused” on a survey each time that happened and put it in with the filled-out forms. The morning students, stationed on both sides of the entrance to catch people leaving, engaged in a competition to see which side could obtain more filled-out questionnaires.